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Oregon's loneliest job shouldn't be teaching

If the state funded high-quality mentorships for new teachers, it could reduce turnover and help student achievement

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The loneliest sound in the world, if you're a new teacher, is the click of the classroom door on the first day of school.

No one to help you if your lesson plan flops. No adult to intervene during fifth period, with your fifth set of 30 sophomores, when the boy in the back mocks you.

By the end of the first week, you suspect that \$30,000 a month would be a more appropriate starting salary than \$30,000 a year. By the end of the first month, your big plan to Stand and Deliver becomes a secret desire to Curl Up and Whimper.

This is why so many teachers leave the profession in the first three years. It's also why Oregon needs to resurrect, fund and develop a mentor program for new teachers and principals. With so many experienced educators retiring over the next decade, Oregon public schools can't afford to lose a single talented new hire because of isolation and lack of support.

About 30 percent of new Oregon teachers quit in the first three years, according to the nonpartisan Chalkboard Project. Part of that attrition is unavoidable, since some teachers leave to start families or seek better-paying jobs to cover their student loans. A small part of the exodus is even desirable: Some people realize they just aren't cut out for teaching.

But every year, scores of talented, well-educated and motivated new teachers leave the profession for a very depressing reason. They never get a fair chance to succeed.

They're isolated in their classroom. They're unfamiliar with district politics. They're overwhelmed with planning lessons -- particularly at the secondary level, where new teachers often get a hodgepodge of the leftover, hard-to-staff classes.

People who go into the teaching profession tend to be deeply idealistic, says Peter Cookson, dean of the graduate school of education and counseling at Lewis and Clark College. Grappling with reality and learning how to set boundaries are skills that don't come easily.

"You'd be amazed. The problems are so basic, and so common," Cookson says.

Lewis and Clark oversees a number of pilot mentorship projects at several districts. Some districts run mentor programs on their own, but they're often unfunded and poorly organized. Finally, however, the state has the momentum and funds to transform this common-sense idea from a dormant state program into a statewide priority.

Stand for Children, an Oregon-based children's advocacy group, embraced mentoring as one of its key legislative priorities. So has the Chalkboard Project, a group of foundations devoted to Oregon schools. Gov. Ted Kulongoski budgeted \$5 million for mentoring for new teachers and principals in his 2007-09

budget.

Stand for Children wants the state to spend about \$24 million by the 2009-11 biennium to offer two-year mentorships for all new teachers and principals. That would buy the staff time for the program to work properly. If this level of funding is out of reach, legislators should consider funding one-year mentorships instead. An intensive mentorship that lasts one year is much better than any longer, half-baked version.

High-quality mentorship programs in other states have dramatically reduced teacher turnover. They've also improved student achievement in classrooms staffed by new teachers. It's hard to ignore a program that is so cost-effective, pro-student and pro-teacher -- or any program that makes those first few years a little less lonely.

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